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ABSTRACT

The thinking behind integrating study skills into a distance education course in history at the University of New England in New South Wales, Australia, is explained. A developmental, rather than remedial, approach to teaching skills was adapted. The developmental approach can be divided into basic areas of awareness and skills. Students develop an awareness of a concept rather than a skill by the learning process, goals, personal variables, and time. The major skills are resources, reading, writing, critical thinking, and specialist skill in history. Each work unit in the course is accompanied by optional exercises to enhance study skills. Students receive an information booklet that contains a course outline, prescribed texts outline, a review of study skills, an overview of the course, study skills exercises, and basic course information. Students are urged to keep a diary of their feelings during the learning process. Additional skills that are integrated with the course content include: goals, time management, concentration, notetaking, and text wiseness. (SW)

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THE INTEGRATION OF STUDY SKILLS INTO A DISTANCE EDUCATION HISTORY COURSE
BY GEOFF ARGER AND JAN CLINTON

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to explain the thinking behind integrating study skills into a distance education course in history at the University of New England. The University has been offering external studies for thirty years, so the project was essentially a conversion of established material, rather than a generation of new material. The project team consisted of two history lecturers, a course developer and a study skills counsellor. Not coincidentally the course developer was a former external studies lecturer in history. This paper was written by the course developer and the counsellor.

As the project closely depends on the integration of study skills into the course without affecting the historiography of the course, it is necessary to explore approaches to history teaching at a distance. To do this we have used as a starting point an article by Finkel (1985) in ASPESA's Distance Education Journal.

THE STARTING POINT

FINKEL (1985) notes the greatest challenge of the history reader is to communicate excitement. He maintains 'students are unlikely to learn voluntarily the tools of historical research and analysis if the process appears to have no other end than to record trivia about generations past'.

We agree with Finkel's notion that conveying excitement of history is a difficult but essential task when teaching history at a distance. The approach outlined in his paper emphasises two other major elements of teaching history - student interest and content. Finkel gives some consideration to skills in the area of writing and he often alludes to the necessary tools of history, however he does not consider it a major element. We contend that skills are a critical component of teaching history. Without efficient skills the depth of interest and content necessary for success in history is beyond the students means. The reverse is also true. Peters (1970) makes the point strongly that teaching involves much more than interesting activities - as with learning there is content and process.

Finkel's approach raises many ideas that are important to teaching history at a distance.

- * CHOICE AND USE OF TEXTS
- * EMPLOYING CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES TO CAPTURE STUDENT INTEREST
- * CRITICAL WRITING WITHIN THE DISCIPLINE
- * USE OF DOCUMENTS
- * STAFF - MARKING AND CONTACT
- * USE OF WORKSHEETS

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For each of these ideas it is important to consider skills. Very rarely does Finkel explain how we can implement these ideas. For example, how can we get a student to recognise, understand and comment on the implications of a controversial issue? More particularly, how do we get students to read and criticise texts, documents and readings?

Finkel spends much time discussing the importance of a step by step approach. The step by step, or developmental, approach forms the basis of this project, so we could only wholeheartedly agree with Finkel's comment. It is difficult however to agree with the contention that behaviour goals interfere with the pleasures of history. (The method of integration outlined refutes Finkel's argument.)

The project answers Finkel's refutation of behavioural goals as being boring and more, by taking a previous course that already possesses the content, as well as interest, and integrating a framework of skills. The new student of history has the opportunity to develop the skills necessary to enhance their chances of success. Too many students feel frustrated at the complexity and enormity of the tasks confronting them and drop the course with negative feelings toward history and low self-esteem.

THE AIMS OF THE PROJECT

The aims of the project can best be understood by combining the objectives of the project with an examination of what was integrated.

The Objectives

1. To introduce students to the process of learning and its tools.
2. To enable the students to understand, develop and apply the skills of deep and surface learning. Specifically to develop a continuum between deep and surface learning.
3. To develop the student skills necessary to study history.
4. To identify and then guide those students with difficulties in the skills and content of the course.
5. To illustrate that skills can be taught through course content.
6. To apply a developmental approach to skills, course content and assessment.
7. To teach skills for study at a 'distance'.

What was to be Integrated

- * A developmental rather than remedial approach to teaching skills was adapted. A hierarchy of skills was built-in to satisfy student needs.
- * The approach can be divided into two basic areas of awareness and skills:

AWARENESS:

Students develop an awareness of a concept rather than a skill by:

- a) The Learning Process: the process of learning has a basic framework that can be applied to all study. First, gaining knowledge; second, retaining knowledge and finally applying knowledge;
- b) Goals: the first 'rule' of study, goals - long and short term are primary to any learning;
- c) Personal Variables: each student must take a look at herself/himself in terms of expectations, limitations, and evaluation which must be realistic;
- c) Time: time management and the concept of chronological perspective must be appreciated.

SKILLS:

The major skills would be:

- a) Resources: how to find them and then how to use them;
- b) Reading: selecting appropriate material; reading for notetaking; reading to remember and reading difficult text;
- c) Writing: the basic style, format;
- d) Critical Thinking: relation to concept of learning; (deep and surface learning) and a framework.
NB. The above skills can be taught concurrently, still using a developmental approach. Each skill can be built upon, thus moving the student towards an effective expression of their knowledge.
- e) Specialist Skill in History: resources, interpretation, and writing in a historical style.

THE FORM OF THE INTEGRATION

The above objectives and integration aims leave open the actual form of the integration of such study skills. However, the history lecturers in the team quickly decided that the total integration created too much of a 'workbook' approach, which was deemed inappropriate for many Australian history students. As there seems an inbuilt suspicion of workbooks at a degree level in Australian distance education, an approach called 'observable integration' was adopted. This can best be understood if we examine the material the students receive in such an approach. The material dispatched in three deliveries was:

1. An Information Booklet which included;

Course Outline
 Prescribed Texts Outline
 Study Skills Review
 Overview of Course - Prepared Reading
 Study Skills Exercises based on Booklet
 Diary
 Study, History and You, covering goals etc.
 Assignment 1
 Basic Course Information

2. Readings for Semester 1 and Study Guide including;

Study Guide
 Study Skills Exercises - Reading, Notetaking, Critical Thinking,
 Introductory Writing Skills
 Assignments 2, 3 and 4.

- 3.a) Readings for Semester 2 and Study Guide which included;

Study Guide
 Exercise and Essay Writing
 Assignments 5, 6 and 7
 Information about Exams and Practical Guide to Exams.

- b) Resource Book 'Writing About History'.

The skills which were integrated with the course content is illustrated below.

SKILLS

COURSE

GOALS

TUDORS AND STUARTS

TIME MANAGEMENT

LIFE STYLE

CONCENTRATION

INTRODUCTION TO ERA) SEM

AWARENESS OF SKILLS

READING SKILLS OVERVIEW

CRITICAL THINKING

NOTETAKING

INTRODUCTORY WRITING

CAUSE AND COURSE OF CIVIL) I
 WAR - THROUGH EMPHASIS)
 ON PERSONALITIES, EVENTS)
 EG. BLACK DEATH AND IDEAS)

WRITING SKILLS - CRITICAL

- WRITING

- THE ESSAY

CONSOLIDATION OF SKILLS

TEXT WISENESS

TUDOR STUART)
 SOCIETY) SEM
 EG. SOCIAL MOBILITY)
 WITCHCRAFT, FOOD,) II
 SEXUAL MORES)

A major concern with most external courses is text books. The concern with texts lies first with the choice of text, its relevance, price etc. and second the students approach to the text. Many students disregard their texts because they find they can't extract the information they want. Students use complaints, such as "its boring", "its too difficult", "its not on the topic", the booklet tries to address some of these concerns by clear description of the books content structure and style. For each text we discuss the relevance of its content and where this content is to be supplemented; the level of difficulty in terms of reading and some techniques in reading the text efficiently eg. selection of material, selecting books, exercise reference list.

Much of the information booklet is devoted to very essential course information, for example Course Outlines, schedules, words of wisdom from the academics and most importantly assessment procedures. Students can do assignments based on content and skills. Assignments are kept in line with the development procedures.

History 110-2 attracts a large percentage of new students - new to study and new to history. It is necessary therefore to provide the students with some direction in the more abstract areas of study such as goals, time management, concentration and the effect of studying history on their life. In the area of study and life, much of the focus is covered by the diary, however, there is a separate section relating specifically to the effect of this course on the student's life style.

The section also tries to bring the student to a basic awareness or understanding of the 'concept' of history. We ask questions such as "Why history?", "What does history mean to you?" We then provided feedback, for example in this case perhaps views of history by other students, and/or historians. The crucial question asked of students is, "How is this course going to affect your life?" - literally. "What changes will have to be made to incorporate this course into your life plan?" From this point we can lead into aspects of study, such as time management, goals etc. As with the rest of the book this section took on an informal practical style where the students are continually asked of their opinion.

EXERCISES AND STUDY GUIDE

Once the students have become aware of the importance of skills in history they are encouraged to increase their skills throughout the course. Each unit of work in the course is accompanied by optional exercises to enhance study skills. Course material and issues provide the content of these exercises, so that the emphasis in the exercises is on skills, content and enthusiasm eg. practice your reading skills.

As the students work through the course, skills are systematically developed, for example with writing skills students begin on a small scale such as making a concise statement then moving step by step to completing an essay.

Two important mechanisms in the integration are the Information Booklet and the Study Guides with exercises. The remainder of this paper looks at these two mechanisms in a little more detail.

THE INFORMATION BOOKLET

The contents page gives a useful overview of the Booklet. It contains a mixture of old and new. The "new" is Item 7 of the Contents Page eg. Contents.

The Information Booklet is the first real contact students have with the course. It is designed to prepare the beginning History student for study and is structured to be a resource as well as a practical introduction to the course. The booklet is divided into several sections covering such areas as Study Skills, Course Outline, Texts and Assessment. Format is simple and informal. It is important to create personalised contact with the student, therefore we adopted a talkative style. The style is in keeping with that of the audio-visual aids which students will receive as the year progresses.

The Study Skills section of the booklet, covers a range of basic techniques in reading, notetaking etc. Basic information and introductory exercises combine to provide the student with a practical guide to study skills necessary in History eg. **reading process**.

One problem of external study work-books is that students are often given directions which are ambiguous or alien to them. For example 'critically approach', 'overview', 'skim'. We recently surveyed the popular study skills books such as; Clanchy & Ballard (1981) 'Essay Writing for Students: a practical guide', Anderson, Durston & Poole (1969) "Reading Effectively" and Wallace (1980) 'Essay Writing', searching for common definitions and instruction for directional words. (Results indicated varying confusion about such definitions, particularly in the area of reading. The varying opinion appears to be similar amongst academics. Consequently quite often students are greatly disadvantaged.) Although the Information Booklet does not solve this problem generally, it does give the new student clear direction for this course. The booklet contains a glossary and other instructions are explained simply and concisely as they appear.

The Information Booklet capitalises on the opportunity to urge students to air their feelings from the first moment they receive their material. Too often distance students are not given the chance of what they consider permission to talk about their feelings. In this case students are encouraged to express fears, joys etc. in the form of a diary, which the first task students are required to complete on page one of their diary contained in their booklet eg. **Your Space**.

Finkel (1985) makes the comment that it is important to capture students' enthusiasm from the very beginning. We believe it is also important for students to capture their own feeling from the very beginning whether it be enthusiasm or fear. Many students withdraw from the course before they really get into it because of feelings that overwhelm. As the course progresses we suggest that the student continues to fill in the diary. We provide a focus in the diary by emphasising milestones such as researching and writing, posting and returning of the first assignment.

Exercises in the workbook assignments are also based on skills, content and as Finkel (1985) says 'controversy'.

One of the major advantages in this form of assignment is that any student who is not coping with the course can be detected and assisted. We assume the student's problem can also be diagnosed specifically. There is a series of small assignments structured around short answers and two major essay assignments in the latter half of the year.

CONCLUSION

The process of integrating Study Skills and History through a course team has difficulties and this project was no exception. However, the difficulties were not insurmountable. The project was slowly implemented, and effective student feedback has been received. Also it is our contention that history cannot be taught without study skills and this project should help support this contention one way or the other. Thus it may be a model which has applications in a wider area than the University of New England History courses. It would be of great interest to see if this was an international truism. It is left to the readers to take up that challenge.

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